

The Gonzales Youth Council: A Decade of Achievement 2015-2025

Celebrating 10 Years of Empowering the Future



Care. Connect. Inform. Advocate. Learn. Serve. Lead.

Table of Contents

About the Gonzales Youth Council Program	03
History	04
Program Goals	07
Past Youth Councils	09
Community Service-Learning Projects	12
Where Are They Now	16
Youth Focused Awards	18
Program Impact	19



A Powerful Voice for the City’s Youth Celebrates Its 10th Anniversary

The City of Gonzales has long been involved in youth development and support and has worked in collaboration with the Gonzales Unified School District (GUSD) to better understand and address the interests and needs of its younger residents. This focus holds special significance for Gonzales, where one of every three residents is under the age of 18.

In 2015, the City raised its commitment to a new level with the creation of a unique youth involvement and mentoring program called the Gonzales Youth Council (GYC). From the outset, the GYC distinguished itself as a youth program unlike most others.

The GYC seeks to engage youth in the civic life of the city and its schools through projects and direct participation in city government and decision-making. GYC members have access to city officials and departments and have been able to initiate change in the community, including the opportunity to have input into city decisions, to undertake significant community projects, and to sponsor policies. Two GYC Commissioners have non-voting seats on the Gonzales City Council.

The GYC enjoys long-term institutional backing from the city that includes both resources and time. The GYC’s integration into the fabric of local government, and the significance of projects undertaken and completed, distinguishes it as an unusually vital and vibrant youth development investment. Its long-term success has made the GYC a model for other cities looking to increase youth engagement and involvement, including Soledad, Greenfield and most recently a youth council pilot program was approved by Salinas City Council.

GYC projects have included input into the city’s cannabis strategy, development of an ordinance regulating underage drinking, and creation of a program to discourage the use of plastic straws to protect the environment. The crown jewel of its work is the Teen Innovation Center, a venue proposed and worked on by the GYC over several years and ultimately being built as part of a new multi-purpose community center developed by the city. Its completion coincides with the GYC’s 10-year anniversary.

GYC graduates have gone on to successful college and professional careers, while the work they did through the GYC continues to improve life in their home community. And each year, a new class of GYC members carries on the work.

The 10-year mark of its existence provides an opportune moment to look back on how the GYC came into being, what it has accomplished, and where some of its graduates have landed.



History

In May 2013 the city held a 4 Youth 4 Community forum. One of the outcomes of the forum was two youth coming before the City Council and asking to be more directly represented and to participate at City Council meetings.

In response to their advocacy, the City Council, with advice from the City Manager and GUSD Superintendent as well as the youth, developed and adopted a resolution establishing two Youth Commissioner advisory seats to the City Council and School Board.

The first two Youth Commissioners were named in 2013. They provided direct youth input into city and school policies and programs while gaining youth leadership training and civic engagement opportunities.

Wanting to support the newly appointed Youth Commissioners and to deepen their leadership skills, the city and school district obtained a grant to pay for a youth development and leadership consultant to facilitate a paid summer internship program in 2014 called Y.E.S. WE CAN! (Youth Empowered via Service While Engaging Community Action Networks).

The two Youth Commissioners fully embraced the experimental leadership development opportunity and immersion into city operations. They also started work on an action project of identifying ways the city and school district could further support youth success. The result was a resolution to the City Council and School Board in Fall 2014 recommending that a Youth Council be established by the City Council to expand formal opportunities for youth.



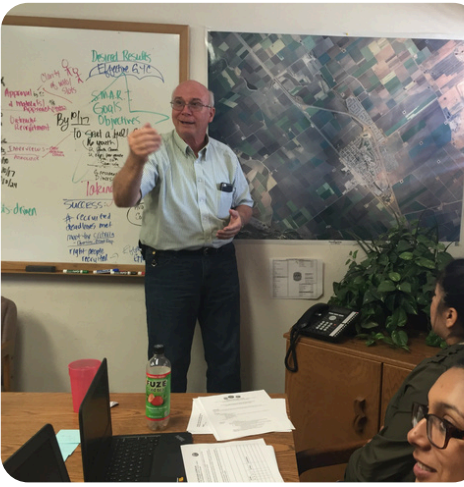
In March 2015 the City Council and GUSD both adopted the resolution which resulted in the creation of a Youth Council as the official advisory group to both governing bodies.

The GYC is composed of GUSD high school students and is led by the two-three Youth Commissioners. City and school leadership also initially agreed to share the investment in on-going leadership training, program development, and mentoring to ensure continued engagement of the youth leaders.

★★★★★ **Magaly Santos, Youth Commissioner, 2020-2021**

“One of the things that makes the GYC stand out is that a pioneering group of students made it happen. Adults were there to give us the tools and encourage us, but it was mostly just youth being innovators. Adults understood that maybe they didn’t need to be making decisions for youth.”





Founding GYC Advisors:

Harold Wolgamott, City of Gonzales,
Public Works Director
Michelle Slade, C4 Consulting

“The difference in Gonzales is that this was sustained. It was not a one-off. That is the real difference. There is a connection through all sectors of the city organization, to the council and policy makers. It outlived city councils, mayors, city managers. It just became part of what you do in Gonzales. It is not going to be eliminated now. If you can capture the essence of the youth in your community, the sky’s the limit. I can’t wait to see it in another 10 years.”

René Mendez, Salinas City Manager. He was Gonzales City Manager when the GYC was launched.



Current GYC Advisors:

Jessica Olmedo, City of Gonzales,
Community Engagement Department
Cindy Aguilar-Castaneda, C4 Consulting and GYC Alum

★★★★★ **Jeffrey Alvarez, Youth Commissioner, 2013-2015**

“The city gave us, the youth, a seat at the table. I was a teenager invited to share my ideas. I learned at a young age that my voice matters. It is just surreal to look back and see the younger person that was me, presenting to a city meeting. Ten years later, I am presenting to city councils [as a professional]. If not for that experience, I wouldn’t feel as comfortable as I do now. The world can seem like a scary place. But just because we come from a small town doesn’t mean that we can’t do big things.”

GYC Program Goals

01



Youth Voice

Advise, recommend, and share information to ensure youth have a voice, power and influence in city government, school, and community, especially related to policies, programs and services that affect children and youth

02



Community Projects

Plan and implement community service-learning action projects and other community-improving activities of high interest to children and youth

03



Leadership Skills

Gain valuable leadership skills and experience to aid their success



07



"In the beginning, I didn't understand the level of engagement that the kids were bringing to the program. I thought it was going to be another of those things that would just take up my time and produce no results, But very quickly I realized that was not the case. The kids were engaged, they were motivated. They generally had a willingness not only to participate but to make things better. I think the program works out so well because from the very beginning the kids realized it wasn't just a show. They were being taken seriously. They are actually setting policy."

Jason Muscio, Gonzales Fire Chief and one of the city officials who work with the GYC

Each year, the previous year's Youth Commissioners recommend candidates for the next year, and the City Manager and School District Superintendent make the two new appointments. The two new Youth Commissioners then recommend and select members of the Youth Council from the applications submitted by the students.

GYC members attend City Council and GUSD meetings, hold their own meetings, undertake quarterly service projects or activities of high interest to youth, hold an annual youth forum, and organize community events.

The two Youth Commissioners spend their summer in a paid, four-week Summer Fellowship program during which they receive leadership training and work directly with city and school leaders and department heads, gaining a personal understanding of internal city workings. They participate in regular leadership coaching sessions and workshops, work on projects with an assigned city department, and interview or observe top officials, including the Mayor, City Manager, city department heads and School Board Members and district employees.

The Youth Commissioners then get directly involved in local government by becoming participatory (non-voting) members of the City Council during their one-year terms. They can review and analyze city and school information and they can make recommendations and presentations to the city and school district board. The commissioners also recruit and orient the new class of GYC members and then lead the Youth Council as it selects and undertakes service-learning projects to improve the community.

Today, the GYC program is fully supported by the city making it one of its staple youth development, civic engagement and leadership development programs.

Gonzales Youth Councils



2015-2016

Youth Commissioners: Anthony Avila and Janelle Gil
GYC Members: Jessica Aceves, Cindy Aguilar-Castañeda, Andrew Funk, Verónica Gutiérrez, Isabel Mendoza, Martin Perez, Adilenne Ramirez, Paulina Rivas, Madisyn Schweitzer, Lisette Tapia



2016-2017

Youth Commissioners: Anthony Avila and Janelle Gil
GYC Members: Cindy Aguilar-Castaneda, Andrew Funk, Scott Funk, Isabel Mendoza, Fabiola Moreno Ruelas, Fatima Patino, Alondra Urena



2017-2018

Youth Commissioners: Cindy Aguilar-Castañeda and Fabiola Moreno Ruelas
GYC Members: Jack Banuelos, Alondra Blanco, Alicia Brandt, Angel Bravo, Vanessa Bravo, Nayeli Gomez, Juliana Hazel, Gerardo Martinez-Hernandez, Isabel Mendoza, Carolina Perez-Reyes, Magaly Santos, Jessica Valdez



2018-2019

Youth Commissioners: Cindy Aguilar-Castañeda and Nayeli Gomez
GYC Members: Julissa Aldaco, Dylan Cervantes, Priscilla Flores, Andrew Funk, Scott Funk, Abran Magana, Carolina Perez Reyes, Angela Rodriguez, Magaly Santos, Madisyn Schweitzer, Jesus Trujillo

Gonzales Youth Councils



2019-2020

Youth Commissioners: Isabel Mendoza, Amy Perez, and Madisyn Schweitzer

GYC Members: Aidan Cervantes, Lorena Flores, Andrew Funk, Alexa Hernandez, Daniel Javier, Luke Naegle, Paulina Rivas, Angela Rodriguez, Magaly Santos, Ruby Virgen



2020-2021

Youth Commissioners: Aidan Cervantes and Magaly Santos

GYC Members: Julissa Aldaco, Aliyah Castillo, Guadalupe Cervantes, Autumn Escobedo, Lorena Flores, Sherlyn Flores, Alexa Hernandez, Maya Leal, Gabriel Mendez, Luke Naegle, Carolina Perez-Reyes, Angela Rodriguez, Yanira Ruacho, Britney Torres, Ruby Virgen



2021-2022

Youth Commissioners: Autumn Escobedo and Sherlyn Flores

GYC Members: Julissa Adalco, Aliyah Castillo, Juan Ramirez, Jozelyn Reyes, Angela Rodriguez, Gabriel Rosas, Yanira Ruacho, Alejandra Ruiz, Gustavo Saldana, Ernesto Santos, Luke Naegle, Valeria Tinoco



2022-2023

Youth Commissioners: Sherlyn Flores and Luke Neagle

GYC Ambassadors: Aliyah Castillo, Jozelyn Reyes-Vargas, Valeria Tinoco

GYC Members: Valeria Cardenas-Pacheco, Anixia Davila, Lizbeth De-Leon - Santos, Odalis Garcia, Angela Madrigal, Vianney Martinez-Valdez, Emily Mendez, Alejandra Pinon-Ruiz, Betsy Preciado, Angela Rodriguez, Gabriel Rosas, Ernesto Santos, Edgar Teodoro-Saavedra, Joziyah Uribe-Lopez, Judith Valeria Zarate

Note: Not all GYC members are pictured.

Gonzales Youth Councils



2023-2024

Youth Commissioners: Aliyah Castillo and Luke Naegle

GYC Ambassadors: Valeria Cardenas-Pacheco, Lizbeth De Leon-Santos, Vianney Martinez-Valdez,

GYC Members: Ariana Calderon, Anixia Davila, Jazmin Diaz, Maya Flores, Jacqueline Gonzales, Angela Madrigal, Emily Mendez, Sofia Navarro, Azucena Parra, Alejandra Piñon Ruiz, Jozelyn Reyes-Vargas, Mirsa Lopez-Valdez, Judith Zarate



2024-2025

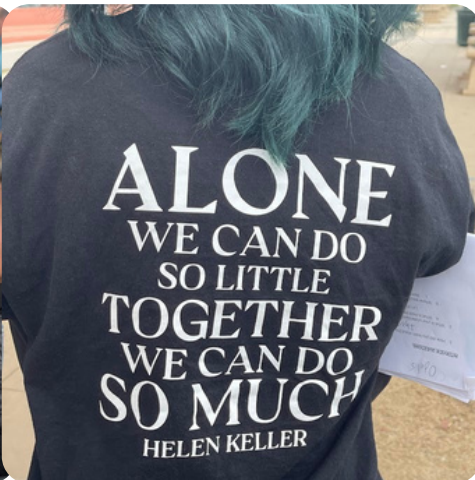
Youth Commissioners: Valeria Cardenas-Pacheco and Emily Mendez

GYC Members: Shelby Anderson, Leo Asher, Isabella Camargo, Lizbeth De Leon-Santos, Cristina Garcia, Vianney Martinez-Valdez, Marco Mireles, Suiry Palomares, Orlando Rodriguez-Perez, Ricardo Rodríguez-Pérez, Denia Rosales, Ana Rosales-Emiliano

Note: Not all GYC members are pictured in photos

★★★★★ **Valeria Tinoco, GYC Member 2020-2022**

"This was my first time being a member of a group that participated in the life of the community, not just the school. I gained an overall understanding of how the city works. We would meet with city workers and we would get to learn how money gets spent in the city. I was able to develop leadership skills, teamwork skills, and public speaking skills. I learned a lot about problem solving and taking initiative. It is important to know how to do that."



Community Service-Learning Projects

GYC projects have covered a range of topics and issues, often reflecting current concerns in the community and among youth. The GYC has a history of completing projects that have an impact on the community. Here are some examples.

2015-2016 Underage Drinking

Teen house parties where alcohol was consumed had become an issue in Gonzales. The GYC decided to tackle this issue by working with the city attorney on a social host ordinance that holds adult hosts of these parties responsible. Although the ordinance contains fines for violations, the GYC stressed that its central aim was not punishment but rather to educate residents on the hazards of alcohol consumption by youth. On a first infraction, residents can skip the fine and instead take an online course from the North American Learning Institute called Minor in Possession.

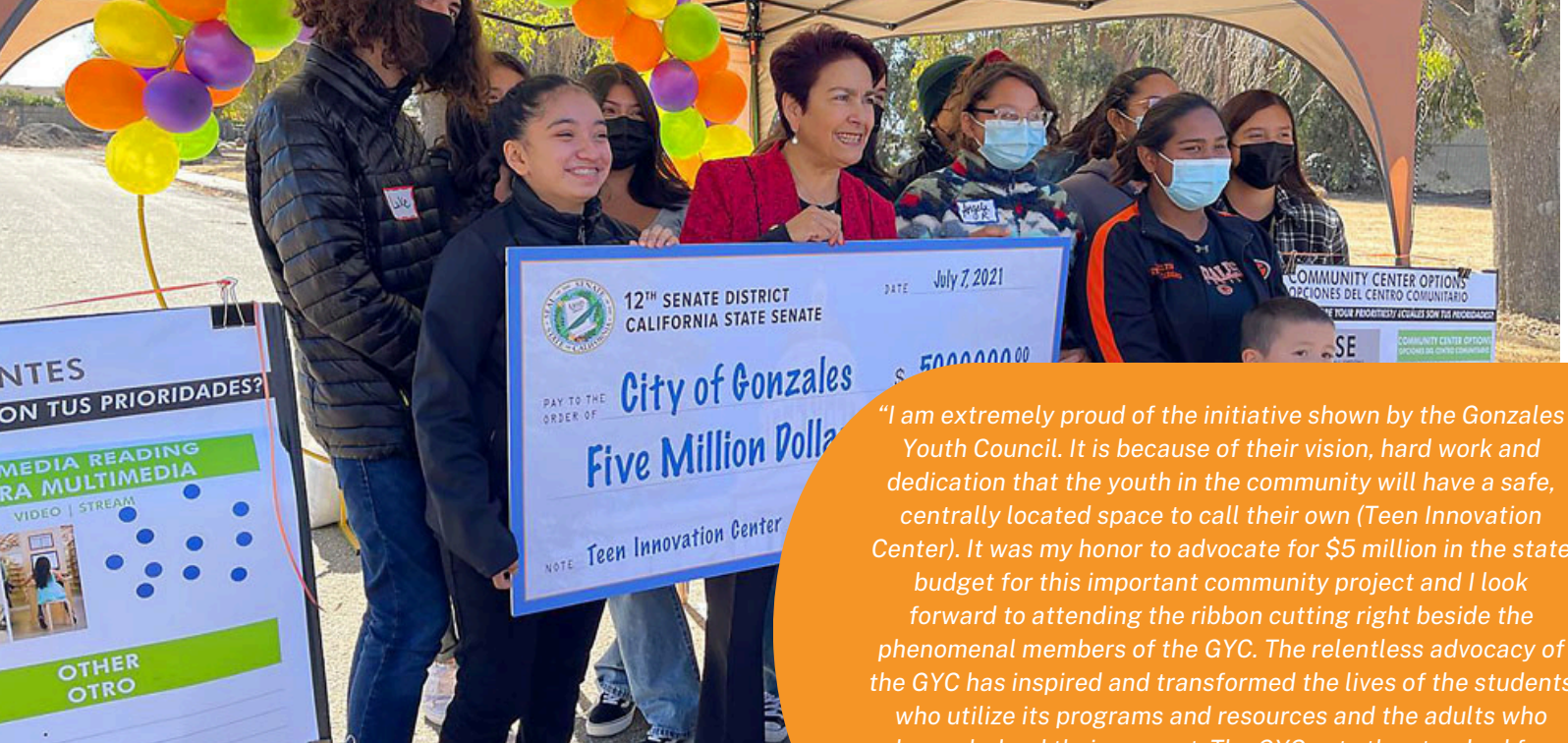
Other cities have adopted social host ordinances but Gonzales was unique in having one crafted and introduced by the community's youth. Youth commissioners did interviews about the ordinance and the issue and also designed and distributed a flyer about it in English and Spanish. The social host ordinance was created with the help of the City's attorney and Sun Street Centers. The ordinance was adopted by the City Council in September 2017.

2016-2017 Cannabis

As cannabis legalization arrived in California, the City of Gonzales faced conflicting opinions on whether to allow new marijuana operations. Debates circulated throughout the community and in schools. The Youth Council took up the debate and held meetings to decide what position they would take and present to the City Council. But the youth were also split in their opinions. So, two Youth Council speakers were selected to present alternate viewpoints. They arrived at a raucous City Council meeting where the cannabis issue was being hotly debated. But when the students rose, the crowd quieted and listened politely. The divisive debate cooled as the students presented arguments against the ills of marijuana usage and for freedom of choice and the economic benefits of new cannabis businesses. Their arguments helped the City Council find a middle ground with an adopted ordinance that allowed cannabis growing operations but not dispensaries.

2017-2018 Environment

GYC members took an interest in environmental issues and learned of the unique problem posed by the proliferation of plastic straws and the outsized impact that tossed plastic straws have on the waste stream fouling the world's oceans. They borrowed an idea from another campaign and mounted a No Straw November project in which they sought to inform restaurants of the problem and encourage them to offer plastic straws only on request in November. The education campaign has had a long-term impact on the use of plastic straws not only in Gonzales but elsewhere as news of the campaign spread. Members of the GYC were among those honored by the Monterey Bay Aquarium as Ocean Heroes.



"I am extremely proud of the initiative shown by the Gonzales Youth Council. It is because of their vision, hard work and dedication that the youth in the community will have a safe, centrally located space to call their own (Teen Innovation Center). It was my honor to advocate for \$5 million in the state budget for this important community project and I look forward to attending the ribbon cutting right beside the phenomenal members of the GYC. The relentless advocacy of the GYC has inspired and transformed the lives of the students who utilize its programs and resources and the adults who have pledged their support. The GYC sets the standard for youth leadership in Monterey County."

California State Senator Anna Caballero

2018-2019 Youth Facility

Responding to the needs of students who complained about lack of adequate space for activities, the GYC proposed a teen center, which has now been in the works through multiple Youth Councils as it continues to move forward. The youth center would provide computers and space for research and college prep, and areas for art, performance and science projects. During the planning process, the youth engaged in strategy sessions to develop the vision for the center, visited local youth centers, and conducted outreach to their peers via a formal survey to gain their insight. After presenting the results to the City Council the youth were given a green light to work with an architecture company to develop initial renderings. In 2021, the planned Teen Innovation Center obtained \$5 million in state funding. The project is now part of the new \$34.8M community center.



The groundbreaking was held in April 2024 and phase one is scheduled to be complete in Decemeber 2025.

★★★★★ Dylan Cervantes, GYC Member, 2018-2019

"There were other clubs in school, but this was different. We interacted with a lot of the population of Gonzales. We worked on real issues with the city. I don't think I was aware of just how different it was at the time. When I got to UCLA, I met people from all over and when I told them about it, they said, this is pretty cool. My year in it, we worked on plans for the teen innovation center. I remember thinking, I wonder if this will ever get built. Then I came back and saw that they had actually broken ground on it.

Community Service-Learning Projects

2019-2022 Mental Health

In the midst of the pandemic, the Youth Council decided to tackle the issue of youth mental health as students were stressed by school closures, social isolation, and the challenges of remote learning. Gonzales Fire Chief Jason Muscio and school officials had connected with the GYC about mental health concerns related to the pandemic. The GYC followed up by launching the Youth Supporting Youth Mental Health Project. With the help of adult allies and funding from the Trinidad & Lupe Gomez Family Fund, the GYC partnered with Dr. Jennifer Lovell and her undergraduate researchers at California State University Monterey Bay to create and disseminate a mental health survey that received 374 responses from middle and high school students. The results of the survey found high levels of anxiety and depression.

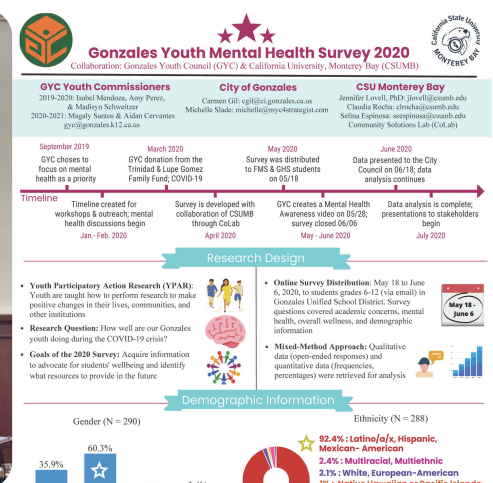
The GYC analyzed the data and summarized the results in a series of infographics that became part of a presentation shared online and with the City Council, School District and the Monterey County Board of Supervisors.

The survey results indicated that the youth wanted to get tips and support electronically, via email or social media. The GYC created a Mental Health Awareness video as well as emails to students and social media posts with tips for students.

The city responded by jointly funding the hiring of a second school-based licensed clinical social worker.

In 2021, the GYC members coauthored an article about their work with guidance and assistance from Dr. Lovell. The article titled *Using Youth-led Participatory Action Research to Advance the Mental Health Needs of Latinx Youth During COVID-19*, was submitted to the National Association of School Psychologists and was ultimately published in their quarterly journal, *School Psychology Review* on July 29, 2022.

The purpose of the article is to showcase the potential of Youth-led Participatory Action Research (YPAR) as a tool for social justice and equity work in schools. In the article the YPAR approach is explained and the GYC's focus on youth well-being during the COVID pandemic is used as the example of a YPAR project. Publication in a national scholarly journal is a very rare achievement for high school students.





2022-2023 Mental Health and Pedestrian Traffic Safety

The GYC launched a second student mental health survey to reassess the level of anxiety among students. Preliminary results from the study indicated reduced levels of anxiety and depression. The GYC planned to examine what impacts the increased access to information and resources that came out of the project may have had on student well-being.

The GYC also undertook a Pedestrian Traffic Safety project in partnership with Ecology Action and Safe Routes to School.

2023-2024 Tenant Rights, Drug Use Prevention, Infrastructure/Community Beautification.

The GYC sponsored a drug prevention week program at the high school. It also conducted a survey of tenants about their knowledge of tenant rights and living conditions. The results were presented to the City Council.

★★★★★ Fabiola Moreno Ruelas, Youth Commissioner, 2017-2018

“Being part of the GYC gave me exposure to so many things. At the very young age of 15, it allowed me to be around city council members, elected officials, government officials. It taught me at a very young age how to deal with these kinds of people. To be exposed to that, coming from a household that never worked with that, was very valuable to me. We had GYC members whose parents were farmworkers, whose background was very different from what a city council did. I got exposure to it at a very young age, and it helped me make decisions later on. It opened doors to opportunities I didn’t know existed.”

Alumni: Where Are They Now

Dozens of Gonzales students have participated in the GYC as commissioners and council members. A few commissioners have now graduated college and begun their professional careers. Among the schools with GYC alumni are UC Berkeley, UC Irvine, UC Santa Cruz, San Francisco State University, Santa Clara University, San Diego State University, UC Davis, and Stanford University, to name a few. Here are profiles of a few past alumni, as of December 2024.



Jeffrey Alvarez

Jeffrey was one of the founding Youth Commissioners, serving two terms from 2013–2015. In high school, he held multiple leadership roles, including President of the Associated Student Body and National Honor Society. His early commitment to civic engagement helped shape the foundation of the GYC and inspired a culture of youth leadership in the community. Jeffrey earned his bachelor's degree in Urban Planning and Public Policy in 2019 from UC Irvine. He now works in renewable energy development at Ampyr Energy USA where he manages large-scale solar and battery energy storage projects across the US. Jeffrey aims to establish a scholarship for Gonzales high school graduates, continuing his lifelong mission to empower the next generation of leaders.



Yesenia Camacho Reyna

Yesenia was also one of the first two Youth Commissioners and served two terms from 2013–2015. A National Honor Society member, she graduated high school in 2015 and received her bachelor's degree in community studies in 2019 from UC Santa Cruz. In 2018, she did a six-month field study for the Children Making a Change (CMAC) Program of the non-profit Coleman Advocates for Children and Youth, where she helped develop curriculum for middle schoolers based around social justice and civic engagement. Since 2019, she has worked at Coleman Associates as the development and communications coordinator assisting with social media and press relations.



Fabiola Moreno Ruelas

Fabiola served as a Youth Commissioner during her senior year, 2017–2018. After graduating, she enrolled as a political science major at San Diego State University, where she became involved in student activities, including a committee that advocated at the state capital on issues important to students. While still in college, she received a settlement from an earlier automobile accident, and she used part of the money to endow a new college scholarship program for Gonzales high school students. Fabiola graduated from SDSU in 2022 with a bachelor's in political science and a minor in public administration. She was accepted into Sacramento State University's Capital Fellows Program, through which she served as a legislative aide to a state assembly member and helped shepherd seven bills to passage. In 2024, she began a new job with the International Brotherhood of Electrical workers local 569, working as a labor organizer specializing in renewable energy and manufacturing jobs related to lithium extraction and technology primarily in the Imperial Valley.

Alumni: Where Are They Now



Cindy Aguilar Castañeda

Cindy was a two-term Youth Commissioner, serving from 2017-2019. Despite suffering from lupus, she played on the tennis team, was in the school band and took classes at Hartnell College. In her senior year in high school, she was chosen as one of two representatives to the Hearst U.S. Senate Youth Program in Washington, D.C. After graduating salutatorian from high school, she enrolled at UC Berkeley with a major in political science and sociology. She currently works for C4 Consulting, a regional firm that provides leadership coaching, and strategy consulting and is run by Michelle Slade, who has been an advisor to the GYC since it was founded in 2015.



Dylan Cervantes

Dylan served as a GYC member during his senior year at Gonzales High School in 2018-2019. He continued his education at UCLA, where he earned a BA in Applied Mathematics in 2023. He received a Gates Foundation scholarship and then worked for Microsoft as a software engineer intern. He was then offered a full-time job at the company in Seattle but decided he could put his knowledge to better use helping other students. He recalled the struggles many students had back in Gonzales with math classes, so he decided to move back and accepted a job as a 7th and 8th grade math teacher. “I wanted to come back and help the kids,” he says.



Magaly Santos

Magaly was a 2020-21 Youth Commissioner. She received a national Premios Juventud award in 2021 for her work advocating for positive change for farmworkers, environmental justice and equality. A child of farmworkers, she has led efforts to improve bus service for farmworkers and to provide information to farmworkers on pesticide exposure. At 16, she was the youngest person nominated for the Women’s Earth Alliance Accelerator program. After graduating from Gonzales High School in 2021, Magaly received her bachelor’s degree in environmental economics and policy from the University of California, Berkeley. She serves as an assistant strategist for C4 Consulting and is also the co-founder of the working group, Leaders 4 Earth, which provides environmental education to high school students, primarily in the Salinas Valley.



Yesenia Camacho Reyna, Youth Commissioner, 2013-2015

“My experience with the City Council and other leaders of the city, school district, and community who mentored me, has opened up opportunities for me to lead and mentor others. It meant a lot for Gonzales to want to make the commitment to support its youth, and to hear from them. I’m glad that they took a shot with us and allowed the GYC to become the amazing opportunity for youth that it is now.”



BE AN OCEAN HERO

TOGETHER, WE'RE INSPIRING CONSERVATION OF THE OCEAN

Youth Focused Awards

2019 Monterey Bay Aquarium Ocean Heroes Award. The GYC was honored by the aquarium for its No Straw November initiative to encourage limits on the use of plastic straws. The goal was to reduce plastic straws from the waste stream that can end up polluting oceans and harming ocean life.



2019 Robert Wood Johnson Culture of Health Prize. The City of Gonzales was one of five communities to win the award in 2019. The GYC was one of the programs highlighted in the award application, with the city commended for creating a program that engages youth and helps foster leadership skills in teens.



2022 Helen Putnam Award. The City of Gonzales was one of 12 winners honored for their innovative government solutions. Gonzales received the Ruth Vreeland Award for Excellence in Engaging Youth in City Government for the GYC's mental health project. The award is issued by the League of California Cities



2023 All-America City Award. The award was presented to the City of Gonzales for its accomplishments over the previous decade. The GYC was highlighted in the award, and two GYC projects received special mention: the mental health project and the Teen Innovation Center. The Award is issued by the National Civic League.





"We empower these young people. Once they figure that out, they get excited about making changes to their community to make it a better place. They find good causes and work toward those goals. They sit through meetings with engineers and designers and other city employees. I think that they learn an immense amount. They get a real education out of the process. I'm proud of them and proud to see what they do, And I think everyone else feels the same way."

Tiffany Twisselmann, Supervisor, Public Works Department, City of Gonzales, and one of the city officials designated to work with the GYC

Program Impact

The Gonzales Youth Council has lived up to its expectations by producing a steady stream of projects and initiatives that have helped advance not just youth issues like the social host ordinance but broader issues of importance to the entire community, like the new community center being built. It has resulted in greater engagement of youth in the life and direction of the community, including participation in recycling projects, student tutoring, and community events. It has also helped deepen their knowledge and understanding of city and school administration, cultivated leadership skills in those who serve, and for some provided them with their first formal work experience.

As former Youth Commissioner Fabiola Ruelas Moreno notes, one of the aspects that continues to make the Youth Council a vibrant organization is its ability to change and adapt. Interests and focus that might have been important to Gonzales youth a decade ago may not be as central to subsequent GYC members. Because the organization reflects both student interests and current concerns, it is able to remain vital to both youth and adults in the community.

The GYC also has been used as a model for other communities seeking to create similar programs. Soledad solicited input and guidance from Gonzales, including from GYC members, to craft its own youth council. Greenfield has launched a similar youth council as well. And Salinas started a pilot youth council project in 2024, with support from City Manager Rene Mendez, who was previously city manager in Gonzales when its Youth Council began.

GONZALES

Wine Capital of Monterey County



2025-2026 GYC Commissioners Ricardo Rodriguez Perez, Orlando Rodriguez Perez and Shelby Anderson

"I am continually inspired by the passion, creativity, and leadership of the Gonzales Youth Council. They remind us all that the future of Gonzales is bright. The City is proud to stand beside our current and future youth council members as they work to strengthen our community, step forward to lead, and take on the world."

Carmen Gil, Gonzales City Manager

Looking Toward the Future

Today the program is led by Co-Advisors Jessica Olmedo, City of Gonzales, and Cindy Aguilar Castañeda of C4 Consulting. The influence of the GYC has come full circle. As mentioned in the Alumni profiles, Cindy Aguilar and Magaly Santos both returned home after college and now work for C4 Consulting. Their journey from youth leaders to mentors is a powerful reminder that today's GYC members are not only shaping the future of Gonzales but may one day return to guide the next generation of civic leaders.

The newest three Youth Commissioners are excited to lead the GYC into the next decade and the City is committed to supporting and mentoring them every step of the way.



GYC Advisor Cindy Aguilar Castañeda, GYC Commissioners Ricardo Rodriguez Perez, Shelby Anderson, and Orlando Rodriguez Perez, GYC alum Magaly Santos, and GYC Advisor Jessica Olmedo



Ani Bacilio-Olivera (Otto Construction Intern), Jessica Olmedo (GYC Advisor), Emily Mendez (Former GYC Member), Cindy Aguilar Castañeda (GYC Advisor), Nicholas Marci (Harris & Associates Intern)

Site of the future Teen Innovation Center opening January 10, 2025.